

FOOD DEFENSE IN THE MEAT AND POULTRY INDUSTRY

As an industry that sells nutritious food to more than 95 percent of Americans, meat and poultry companies place a high priority on ensuring the security of their food facilities and supply. Although food defense is a relatively new concept for some consumers and the news media, it is not a new concept to the meat and poultry industry.

The meat and poultry industry is one of the most heavily regulated and inspected industries in the U.S. and has operated securely for decades. The security infrastructure built and refined over time to meet a variety of challenges is serving consumers well.

Plant Security

Meat and poultry processors recognize they have an enormous responsibility in providing safe and wholesome products to millions of Americans. Meat and poultry plants by design are closed, secure operations. Fences and security guards are commonplace to ensure that only appropriate personnel are permitted to enter plants. Visitors are restricted and, if granted access, will be required to:

- Provide photo identification and be escorted;
- Remove all jewelry, watches, phones and photographic equipment;
- Wear special boots, hairnets and protective covering clothing; and
- Observe all sanitation procedures, like washing hands and boots at regular intervals and not entering some parts of the plant.

Employees in meat and poultry plants are assigned to particular areas where they work. This practice helps ensure staff are in appropriate places. For example, someone who works in raw material receiving would not be entering a packaging area due to the potential for cross-contamination and to ensure food security. Movement and production is monitored in many plants by security cameras.

Internal Food Safety Checks Can Serve Food Defense Needs

Plants employ a variety of technologies and strategies to ensure food safety. Plants must have in place Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plans. Under HACCP, companies analyze where in their systems' problems can occur and take steps to concentrate resources at those "critical" points. In developing HACCP plans, companies must consider all potential physical, chemical, and biological hazards and explain the steps they take to prevent problems.

HACCP has created a mindset in the industry to anticipate problems before they occur—the best way to prevent a crisis.

Some useful strategies to identify food defense breaches, include:

- Inspecting all animals prior to slaughter to identify sick animals that may not be fit for human consumption;
- Government and private laboratory screening for unusual levels of compounds in animal tissues;
- Using metal detectors or x-rays to identify contamination in products;
- Using carcass washes with hot water or dilute acid solutions to clean carcasses and destroy bacteria;
- Post-packaging pasteurization, using hot water, infrared heat, or radiation; and
- Microbiological tests to ensure products are safe.

Government Oversight

In addition, approximately 6,500 meat and poultry plants in all 50 states are inspected aggressively by nearly 8,000 federal inspectors from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). State inspectors oversee another 3,000 small plants in 25 states. Inspectors are present in slaughter plants during every minute of operation and in processing plants on a daily basis.

Inspectors check that plants are sanitary and good manufacturing processes are being followed. These inspectors also routinely conduct tests for chemical and microbial contamination that supplement testing done by the plant.

Imported Meat and Poultry Food Defense

USDA certifies meat and poultry inspection systems in foreign countries that wish to ship products to the U.S. Certified foreign plants must meet all rules and regulations or must operate under rules that are equivalent to U.S. rules. Foreign meat and poultry inspectors must monitor safety in virtually the same way as U.S. inspectors. USDA officials pay periodic visits to certify the foreign inspection programs. When imported meat and poultry products arrive at U.S. borders, products are subject to reinspection to ensure safety before they are permitted entry into U.S. commerce.

Food Defense Since September 2001

A basic food defense infrastructure was in place in the meat and poultry industry before the events of September 2001. Still, meat and poultry companies have tightened existing food defense and procedures to further restrict already limited visitor policies. For example, North American Meat Institute (NAMI) members developed Food Defense Guidelines that served as the basis for USDA guidelines for all meat and poultry establishments.

NAMI urged its members to review food defense plans, to enforce carefully all visitor and identification policies, to develop crisis management plans, and to identify in advance appropriate local, state, and federal law enforcement officials in the event a food defense breach occurs. In addition, NAMI acts as a liaison between meat and poultry plants and the U.S. government on food defense issues to ensure all precautions are being taken.

Consumers should be reassured by the secure nature of meat and poultry plants, by internal food safety procedures, and by aggressive government oversight that have made U.S. meat and poultry among the safest anywhere.

Helpful Links

North American Meat Institute
<http://www.meatinstitute.org>

FSIS food Defense and Emergency Response
<http://www.fsis.usda.org/wps/portal/fsis/topics/food-defense-and-emergency-response>

Developing a Food Defense Plan
http://www.fsis.usda.gov/PDF/Food_Defense_Plan.pdf

U.S. Department of Agriculture
<http://www.usda.gov>